

You Can Do Something About Arthritis

"You are getting older, what do you expect? You have arthritis, you just have to live with it." These are things you may have heard friends, family or health care workers say. Many people believe that if they have arthritis there is nothing they can do about it. If you have arthritis, you can learn to live with it but with less pain, do the things you want to do and enjoy a better quality of life. You can do something about arthritis.

Arthritis is not just one disease. There are over 100 types. The most common kind is osteoarthritis which causes the soft cushioning around the ends of the bones to break down. This can cause bony spurs to develop and bones to rub painfully together. Another common type is rheumatoid arthritis which can cause painful swelling and joint deformity. Other types include gout, psoriatic arthritis, ankylosing spondylitis, and scleroderma. A common pain syndrome often treated by arthritis specialists is fibromyalgia. It is important to work with a doctor, determine what kind of arthritis you have and find the best treatment for you.

There are no miracle cures for arthritis, but there are many things you can do to help make your life with arthritis better. Some of these include appropriate exercise, weight management, arthritis education classes, self-help methods, medications, activity modification and assistance devices, alternative and complementary therapies, and surgery.

At one time people were told that if they had arthritis they should not exercise. Now we know that people can and should exercise if they have arthritis. It is recommended that people with arthritis do at least 30 minutes of moderate exercise three or more days a week. You do not have to start with that much right away, but can build up from whatever you can do now. This should include low-impact exercises that make you breathe harder and sweat a little, such as walking, biking, dancing, Tai Chi, gentle yoga or gardening. Your exercise routine should include range of motion exercises and strengthening exercises. There are programs especially for people with arthritis, such as the warm water Arthritis Foundation Aquatics Program and the Arthritis Foundation Exercise Program. Exercising strengthens the muscles that support the joint, nourishes joints and keeps them moveable, and helps with overall health and wellness.

If you are overweight, you have more of a chance of having osteoarthritis, especially in the knees and hips, than someone who is not overweight. Extra weight can also cause more pain because there is more stress in these joints and, in some cases, in the back. Even losing small amounts of weight can help reduce pain.

The Arthritis Foundation has a six-session class called the Arthritis Self-Help Course which has been shown to help people reduce their pain, increase social activity and reduce medical costs. Developed at Stanford University, this course helps people help themselves in managing their arthritis. Arthritis education days or seminars can help you learn more about arthritis. If you have access to the Internet, reliable information is available from the Arthritis Foundation (www.arthritis.org); the National Institute of Arthritis, Musculoskeletal, and Skin Diseases (www.niams.nih.gov); and The American College of Rheumatology www.rheumatology.org.

How you arrange your home or work area can make a big difference in how you feel. Go through each room one at a time and pay attention to each movement you have to make in order to do your tasks. Every time you do something that causes pain or feels uncomfortable, think about the motion you are making. If you are bending down to get something you use often from a low cupboard and it causes pain, stop and think, how can I change this so it doesn't cause pain? It may be as simple as moving the things you use most often to shelves between knee and shoulder level to avoid bending or reaching. Try different arrangements and ways to help reduce your pain.

There are many tools available that make doing everyday activities much easier and less painful. Reacher/grabbers, button fasteners, jar openers, large handle utensils and many more items that can help with activities of daily living are available through catalogs or department stores. You can also do things to adapt tools or utensils that you already have such as building up handles with foam or putty.

People sometimes give up things they love to do because of the pain, stiffness or loss of joint mobility from arthritis. You may not be able to continue to do things the way you always have, but with some changes you may be able to continue your activities. Gardening, for example, is a favorite pastime for many. There are many techniques that can be used such as tabletop or container gardening, raised beds, using trellises, or hanging pots on pulley systems. Modified tools can also be a great help.

Pain also causes stress, sometimes creating feelings of sadness and worry. Stress can cause you to tighten or tense muscles. If muscles are tight they can make the pain worse. Learning a few relaxation techniques can help. These might include deep breathing techniques, prayer or meditation, or using a guided imagery relaxation tape.

Medications can be an important part of arthritis management. Some arthritis medicines help reduce pain. Others are very important for slowing the progress of the disease to reduce damage to the joints. Almost all medications have the potential of side effects. It is important to stay informed, work with your doctor, and weigh the benefits versus the risks.

When pain has gotten so bad or a joint has worn out to the degree that a person is unable to do what they need or want to do, surgery might be needed. This decision must be made by the patient with support and guidance from their doctor. Total joint replacement is not the only option available and your doctor can explain the many different surgery choices and what might be best for you.

Physical therapists and occupational therapists can help people regain the ability to do the things they need and want to do, or help them find a different way to do it. After an injury or surgery, physical therapists help a person recover and prevent further injury. Occupational therapists advise people in making changes around the home and workplace with less pain and risk of injury, and to adapt for disabilities or limitations they may have.

There are complementary or non-medical therapies that have shown some effectiveness for some people with arthritis. Supplements such as glucosamine and chondroitin sulfate have shown promise. Make sure your doctor knows about any supplements that you are taking. Supplements in the U.S. are unregulated, so purchase from reputable sources. Beware of anything that promises a "miracle cure."

Massage and acupuncture have helped relieve pain and improve outlook and attitude.

The Arthritis Foundation has many brochures and books available on these and other topics. Call 800-444-4993 from Idaho or Utah to request more information or dial 2-1-1, the Idaho CareLine and request an arthritis materials packet.